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HOUSEKEEPERS' CHAT

SATURDAY, September 18, 1937

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SUBJECT: "NEWS NOTES FROM WASHINGTON." Information from the Office of Information, U. S. Department of Agriculture.

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Listeners, our Washington correspondent again writes us what she calls one of her "odds-and-ends" letters--little news items picked up here and there around the Department of Agriculture.

Reading now from her news-letter: "Department-of-Agriculture scientists have been finding out lately what great travelers the fruits and vegetables in our large-city markets are. They have been showing me figures that prove that the vegetables in a simple combination-salad served in Chicago, say, may have traveled more than 5 thousand miles! The tomatoes may have come all the way from Florida, the lettuce from California, the onions from the Rio Grande valley, and so on.

"A survey of transit and storage diseases, which Department scientists have just finished, gives the information on the modern well-traveled fruit or vegetable. It shows that 2 thousand miles is a very common distance for fresh products to go to the markets of our large cities. Over a third of the 70-thousand-and-some carloads of fresh products sold in Chicago last year traveled over 2 thousand miles; and what is even more remarkable, arrived in almost perfect condition. Much of this success is the result of the tests and studies made here at the Department on better shipping and storage.

"The recent survey shows that a tenth of all the fresh fruits and vegetables in Chicago markets traveled more than 25 hundred miles. And another tenth covered 15 hundred miles. A fourth made a trip of over a thousand miles. And slightly less than a fourth came from Illinois and nearby States, traveling less than 5 hundred miles to the city.

"Thanks to the new findings in storing and shipping methods, you can now buy most fresh fruits and vegetables all the year round in most large cities and in many smaller ones. Even strawberries and watermelons, which not long ago had such a brief season, now are on the market from 6 to 8 months of the year.

"Department scientists are interested not only in better shipping and storage for vegetables, but also in better vegetables. Plant-explorers go out each year to search the corners of the earth for new plants for the Department's plant-breeding work--new vegetables that have some characteristic lacking in this country's vegetables, and that can be crossed with the vegetables we already have. The plant-explorers look for vegetables in other parts of the world that will resist diseases or insects or drought or some of the other present troubles of vegetables in this country. Or they try to find vegetables with better flavor or color or some other desirable quality. One of these days they will probably be out hunting for vegetables that have the highest vitamin-content.

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"Of course, commercial firms as well as people who happened to be interested, have long produced better vegetables, largely by what the scientists call 'mass selection.' And some have helped along the cause of better vegetables by hybridization. But systematic vegetable-breeding, carefully and scientifically planned by a public agency, is comparatively new. So you may be interested to know that we now have a new Federal station at Charleston, South Carolina, where scientists are devoting themselves entirely to the job of breeding better vegetables for growing in the Southeast. And we also have the Great Plains Horticultural Field Station at Cheyenne, Wyoming, where scientists are working to breed vegetables adapted to growing on the Plains.

"Here is a little story I've heard from the Soil Conservation people about an old vine that is just coming in for its due appreciation--a familiar plant of the Old South, usually called the 'porch vine.' It has climbed up many a southern porch and given grateful shade by its lush foliage. Southern farmers also have used it as a hay and pasture crop during the last thirty years or so. But they all just took the hardy porch vine for granted.

"Then along came the men in the Soil Conservation Service looking for plants to anchor the top-soil to southern farm land and save the farmers any further loss of their valuable soil. In this search they came on the porch vine and found that it would hold down soil--and more. It grows rapidly and densely, sets plenty of roots firmly in the soil, and, better still, pays its own way by putting nourishment into the land it grows in.

"They tell me the correct name for the porch vine is the kudzu. In the Southeast it grows under almost any condition, on rich land or poor land. Under favorable conditions, it often sends out runners 60 to 70 feet long in one season. These runners take root every few feet at the nodes and literally rope down the soil. Because kudzu is one of the legume family--the bean and pea family, you know--it has the power of restoring nitrogen to the soil. That helps rebuild soil already impoverished by erosion.

"So the old porch vine these days is going into service in controlling gullies that have been washing away in the Southeast. The vines cover a gully with a dense mat of vegetation in a very short time and stop any further cutting of the soil. And the Soil Conservation people are also putting the porch vine to work holding steep slopes and other areas damaged by erosion."

That concludes this week's news letter from Washington, D. C.

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